

Spotting a Sketchy Rescue

By Laura Rose

We should support good horse rescues. Since humane societies are rarely equipped to take in equines, these private organizations fill a huge need. However, some “rescues” are really scams, hoarders, or horse dealers in disguise. Here’s how to tell the altruists from the underhanded.

First and foremost, be wary of excessive pathos. Every animal rescue is going to have some emotional, heart-wrenching stories to tell, and that’s okay for occasionally grabbing the attention of donors. However, if an organization is **constantly** bombarding the public with tales of woe and pitiful pictures, that’s a sign that they’re deliberately milking tragedies. This is especially true when the sad stories are about the rescue manager’s personal life-- medical bills, feeling let down or persecuted by others, vehicle breakdowns, etc. Anyone who continually cries “pity me!” should not be in charge of what is essentially a very demanding large animal business.

Although rescues are normally non-profit, they are still professional establishments. Like any business, they shouldn’t spend more they can make (receive in donations), or take on more work (animals) than they can handle. Horse rescues that consistently beg for help, fall short on hay, and are in debt to the local vet, *yet are still taking in more horses* are not rescues at all: these are hoarders. They may *intend* to provide good care for, rehabilitate, and adopt out all their equines. However, they amass so many, they don’t have the time or money to do so. Neglect results. Volunteers can help this situation, but they are only temporary relief. *Good* rescues are able to responsibly limit intake, and adopt out enough horses on a regular basis, so that overstretching is rarely an issue.

Sometimes rescues act too much like permanent sanctuaries, warehousing even healthy horses instead of helping them move on. Somehow, no adopter is ever good enough. Or alternatively, none of the horses are “really ready” to be adopted. Hoarders also resist euthanizing equines that have long lacked good quality of life. This is doubly shameful, since the donations keeping one suffering horse barely alive could instead be used to take in a healthier one.

On the other end of the spectrum are the horse dealers posing as rescuers. These brokers care only about a quick profit. Preying on the public’s sympathy, they take in donations for feed, vet, and farrier bills-- and pocket most of them. Dealers disguised as rescuers rarely bother with any real adoption requirements or contracts. They will sell intact studs and sometimes even breed mares regardless of their conformation or health. They don’t quarantine new intakes and will lie about a horse’s health and abilities in order to sell it. They actively seek out horses to take in, even from out-of-state, so they can sell them again quickly. These opportunists may claim to be “non-profit,” but their personal finances are often mixed with the rescue’s. An establishment’s 501(c)3 status can easily be checked by visiting the Exempt Organizations page on the IRS’s website, or calling the EO department directly at 1-877-829-5500.

When researching a rescue, look for transparency. A rescue asking for public donations should be willing to provide, or proactively offer, proof of their honesty. Pictures and descriptions of each horse being cared for and offered for adoption should be easily accessible, along with a thorough explanation of how the adoption process works. A board of directors, monthly meeting minutes, up-to-date financial records, and certification by state or national agencies are the gold standards here. One such agency is the Global Federation of Animal Sanctuaries.

Red flags indicating a dysfunctional horse rescue include:

- Dangerous or poor fencing
- Junk, deep mud, or lots of rocks in paddocks
- Pleas combined with threats: "Donate NOW or this mare goes to slaughter!"
- Reluctance to let anyone visit the property
- Unwillingness or inability to take back a horse from an adopter who can't keep it
- Polite questions about specific horses or the operation remain unanswered
- Basic utilities like water and electricity are shut off at any time
- The rescue never holds fundraisers or open houses
- There are no "after rehab" photos of horses, or stories about successful adoptions
- Unbroke or ill-mannered horses don't receive any training before being offered for adoption
- Lack of professionalism in spelling, grammar, and public relations in general
- The use of questionable training techniques

Great rescues:

- Make adoption a top priority (but not without provisions)
- Recruit volunteers who stick around
- Don't insist that adopters use a very specific training method
- Allow or encourage donors to send money directly to their vet or farrier
- Keep on top of vet and farrier care, as well as record-keeping
- Explain exactly how and when donations are used
- Always advocate for what's best for the *horses*